The Miller’s Tale

Lines 79-112

* A rich carpenter named John lives in Oxford and takes lodgers into his home.
* A poor but clever scholar named Nicholas boards with him.
* The narrator gives us an extensive description of Nicholas's character. (For more on this portrait, see the "Character Analysis" section.)

Lines 113-124

* John has married an eighteen-year-old woman named Alisoun.
* He is apparently jealous about her, and keeps her on a tight leash.
* The reason he is so jealous is that Alisoun is much younger than him, and he fears being made a "cuckold" by Alisoun cheating on him.
* John has never read the proverb by the ancient Greek philosopher Cato, which says that men should marry a woman similar to them in situation and age because youth and the elderly don't mix well.
* Since he has already married Alisoun, though, John must endure his situation.

Lines 125-162

* The narrator gives us an extensive description of Alisoun's character. (For more on this portrait, see the "Character Analysis" section.)

Lines 163-198

* One day when John is away in a nearby town, Nicholas decides to seduce Alisoun.
* He grabs her butt and tells her that unless she grants him her love, he will die.
* Alisoun leaps away from him and declares that she will not kiss him.
* She threatens to scream unless Nicholas leaves her alone.
* Nicholas asks Alisoun to grant him mercy, pleading with her to have sex with him.
* Alisoun relents and grants Nicholas her "love" (probably meaning sex).
* She warns Nicholas that her husband is jealous. The two of them must be very careful and secretive about the affair; otherwise she will be punished.
* Nicholas agrees to wait until John is not around to have sex with Alisoun again.
* He pats her butt and kisses her some more.
* Nicholas plays his harp.

Lines 199-230

* Alisoun goes to the parish church one day looking very clean and shiny.
* At the parish church resides Absolon, the parish clerk.
* The narrator gives us an extended description of Absolon's character. (For more on this portrait, see the "Character Analysis" section.)

Lines 231-288

* On a holiday, when Absolon is waving incense around the wives of the parish, he sees Alisoun and takes such a liking to her that, were he a cat and she a mouse, he would snatch her up right away.
* So much love has he in his heart for Alisoun that he takes no offering that day from any of the wives. (This part is rather unclear: does he do this so that Alisoun can keep her money?)
* Absolon begins courting Alisoun by singing to her under the full moon, asking her to take him as a lover.
* John hears Absolon and asks Alisoun if she hears him too.
* Alisoun replies that she does hear him.
* After that night, Absolon continues his unsuccessful courtship of Alisoun, kept awake night and day by his love-sickness.
* Absolon employs many means to try to win Alisoun, including:
  + combing his hair carefully
  + enlisting messengers and go-betweens
  + swearing to be her servant
  + singing like a nightingale
  + sending her gifts of sweetened wine, spiced ale, and cakes
  + playing Herod in the local play
* Despite Absolon's best efforts, Alisoun refuses to become his lover, because her heart already belongs to Nicholas.
* In fact, Alisoun makes Absolon look like a fool.
* The narrator tells us that Absolon stands no chance with Alisoun because Nicholas is closer to her and always in her sight, thus keeping her attention away from Absolon.

Lines 289-330

* Nicholas and Alisoun make a plan that will enable them to spend the entire night together in bed without John's knowledge.
* Nicholas goes into his room, taking with him enough food and drink for a whole day.
* He tells Alisoun that if John asks about him, she should say she doesn't know where he is, that she hasn't seen him all day, she thinks he might be ill, and even when her maid called for him, she received no response.
* Nicholas spends the whole Saturday in his room.
* On Sunday, John begins to worry about Nicholas, wondering aloud if he has died.
* John sends a servant to knock on Nicholas's door.
* The servant knocks hard on Nicholas's door and asks him how he can sleep the whole day away.

Lines 331-387

* Upon hearing nothing from Nicholas's room, John's servant peeks through a hole in the wall and sees Nicholas sitting bolt upright and gaping, as though he's looked too long at the new moon (meaning, he looks crazed).
* The servant tells John about the condition in which he found Nicholas.
* John declares that Nicholas must have meddled too much in astronomy and thus gone mad.
* John says that men should not know too much about God's secrets: it's much better to be an unlearned man who only knows his Apostle's Creed.
* He tells about another clerk who spent too much time doing astronomy. That clerk was star-gazing in a field in an attempt to tell the future, and he fell into a pit instead.
* John says he is sorry for Nicholas, who will suffer because of all his studying.
* John tells the servant to push on the door while he pries at it with a stick.
* The servant manages to take the door off by its hinges.
* Nicholas is sitting as still as a stone and gazing up at the ceiling.
* John thinks Nicholas is in despair. He shakes him by the shoulders, pleading with him to wake up.
* He makes the sign of the cross on Nicholas against elves and demons and says a prayer at the four corners of the house in an attempt to exorcise from Nicholas the spirit he thinks has captured him.
* Nicholas appears to wake and sighs, wondering aloud if the whole world is about to be lost.
* John asks him what he means.
* Nicholas tells John to fetch him a drink, saying that he wants to speak privately to John about something that concerns them both.

Lines 388-438

* John brings Nicholas a quart of ale, which the two of them share.
* After John sits down next to Nicholas, he closes the door and begins to speak.
* Nicholas makes John swear not to tell anyone else what he is about to tell him.
* John swears that he won't, and that he is not the type to betray secrets.
* Nicholas tells John that, in studying astrology, he has discovered that the following Monday there would be a flood as big as the one God sent in Noah's time. In less than an hour of rain, everyone would drown.
* John expresses sorrow over the possible death of Alisoun, and asks if there is no way to prevent it.
* Nicholas says that there is, but to do it John must rely upon his counsel.
* Nicholas recites a proverb by Solomon that incites all things to be worked by counsel and asks John if he remembers how God saved Noah.
* John replies that he does remember the story of Noah.
* Nicholas asks if John remembers what a hard time Noah had in getting his whole family on the ark, especially his wife.
* Nicholas says that what they do, therefore, they must do quickly.

Lines 439-492

* Nicholas advises John to obtain three large tubs for them to use as boats, and to stock these tubs with enough food and drink for a day, after which, he promises, the waters will retreat.
* Nicholas makes John promise not to tell his servants, but says he can't tell him why this secrecy is necessary, and that John shouldn't ask about God's secrets.
* Nicholas says if John follows his counsel, he and his wife will have as great a grace as Noah had – they will be saved from drowning in the flood.

Lines 493-529

* John leaves the room in a sorry state.
* He explains the situation to Alisoun, who pretends to believe him and tells him to go ahead quickly in order to save their lives.
* The narrator comments upon how great a thing imagination is: so deep can an impression (or imagining) be that men can die of it.
* John imagines that he can see the flood drowning Alisoun, which makes him weep.
* John gets three tubs and hangs them from the rafters of his house, then places ladders next to each one.
* He places bread, cheese and ale in each tub and sends his servants off to London.
* John, Nicholas, and Alisoun climb into the tubs.

Lines 530-548

* Nicholas tells everyone to be quiet.
* John sits very still in his tub, saying prayers and waiting for the rain.
* John falls asleep and begins to snore.
* Nicholas and Alisoun climb down from their tubs and go to bed together.
* They have sex in John's bed until almost dawn

Lines 549-578

* Absolon asks a friend if he's seen John recently.
* The friend replies that he has not seen John since Saturday. He thinks he must have gone out of town to buy timber.
* Absolon is overjoyed, declaring this the perfect time to court Alisoun.
* He describes his plan to stand beneath Alisoun's window at dawn and tell her of his love-longing.
* Absolon says his mouth is itchy, which he believes is a sign it's in need of kissing.
* Also, he says, he dreamed last night he was at a feast.
* He says he will sleep for two hours, then wake and play.

Lines 579-599

* Absolon wakes at cock-crow.
* He dresses himself nicely and chews spices and licorice to make his breath smell good.
* He goes to the carpenter's house and stands at Alisoun's window, the bottom of which is only at his chest because it is so low.
* He asks Alisoun to wake and speak to him, claiming she cares little for his sadness. He describes himself as a lamb longing for the teat and a turtle-dove, and says he eats no more than a maid, so strong is his love-sickness.

Lines 600-614

* Alisoun tells Absolon to go away and let her sleep, because she loves someone else.
* Absolon asks Alisoun to at least give him a kiss before he goes.
* Alisoun asks if Absolon will go away if she kisses him.
* Absolon replies that he will.
* Alisoun tells Absolon to get ready, for she's coming to the window.
* Alisoun tells Nicholas that soon, he will have a good laugh.

Lines 614-635

* Absolon gets down on his knees next to the window.
* He says he feels like a lord, and he is certain that after this kiss, there will be more to come.
* He tells Alisoun he awaits her will.
* Alisoun unbars the window and tells Absolon to come quickly so the neighbors don't see him.
* Absolon wipes his mouth dry.
* The night is very dark.
* Alisoun puts her "hole" (butt) out the window.
* Absolon kisses it enthusiastically.
* He pulls back, for he thinks he feels a beard – something rough and long-haired.
* Absolon wonders aloud what he's just done.
* Alisoun laughs and closes the window.
* Nicholas expresses delight about the joke

Lines 631-686

* Absolon hears Nicholas and declares his intention to get revenge on Alisoun.
* He washes his lips vigorously with sand, straw, and wood chips, so disgusted is he by what he has just done.
* From that moment on, he is healed of his love-sickness.
* He goes across the street to the blacksmith's shop and knocks loudly on the door.
* The blacksmith answers the door and wonders what Absolon is doing awake so early, speculating that it must be because of a girl.
* Absolon asks to borrow a hot poker from the blacksmith.
* The blacksmith agrees but asks him what he intends to do with it.
* Absolon says he will tell him tomorrow.
* Absolon takes the poker to the carpenter's house and knocks on Alisoun's window.

Lines 682-697

* Alisoun asks who's there, thinking it's a thief.
* Absolon answers that it's him and tells Alisoun he's brought her a gold ring, which he will trade her for a kiss.
* Nicholas has gotten up to go pee and decides he wants in on Alisoun's joke.
* He sticks his butt out the window.
* Absolon tells 'Alisoun' to speak so he can figure out where she is.

Lines 698-707

* Nicholas farts in Absolon's face so percussively that Absolon is nearly blinded by the force of it.
* Absolon brands Nicholas with the hot iron.
* In great pain, Nicholas cries out for water.

Lines 708-746

* Hearing Nicholas's cry and thinking it refers to the flood, John cuts the ropes attaching his tub to the ceiling.
* John crashes to the floor, where he lies in a faint.
* Alisoun and Nicholas run out into the street, crying in a panic.
* Hearing the commotion, the neighbors run to the carpenter's house to see what's going on.
* The neighbors gape at John, who still lies in a faint and has broken his arm.
* John tries to explain what has happened, but he is interrupted by Nicholas and Alisoun.
* Nicholas and Alisoun tell the gathered crowd that John is crazy and so afraid of a flood that he bought three tubs in order to avoid drowning.
* The crowd laughs at John. The clerks of the town declare him crazy.
* Thus is John cuckolded, Absolon humiliated, and Nicholas branded.
* The narrator declares the tale concluded.